

TENEMENT-HOUSE INSPECTION *

By YOHANNA VON WAGNER

Sanitary Inspector, Yonkers, N. Y.

BECAUSE so little is done to teach people in their homes how to better their condition, I am grateful for this opportunity to speak to you about my work in the tenement-houses as Sanitary Inspector.

While not every city has a tenement-house problem, every city has a housing problem, and it is the duty of the Board of Health to see that the homes of the working-classes are made at least healthful.

Organizations of public-spirited citizens should be formed, which, after acquainting themselves with local conditions, would revise building and sanitary codes and see to the enforcement of laws. Already this is done in New York, too late, to be sure, to eradicate the evil which a tenement-house is,—it is here to stay,—but an organization of men and women can do much to improve the homes of the poor. To be able to cope with such a problem, a thorough knowledge of existing conditions is essential. A house-to-house inspection will reveal, aside from existing facts, the wants and needs of the people.

Having been a tenement-house inspector for over four years, I am able to speak of the need and benefit of such work. It touches the people in their homes, and their lives can often be made brighter by helpful sympathy. From year to year it is harder for the poor man to live, and the daily complaint is that he cannot find rooms.

Twenty-five years ago the Chief of the Department of Health in Glasgow realized the need of women inspectors in connection with the Health Department, as only women could deal with women effectively, and ever since that time the work has been done there by women health visitors, as they are called.

The larger cities in England have followed the example of Glasgow, and there are several sanitary institutes in England where men and women are graduated to do the work of sanitary inspectors.

Several years ago in Chicago the Board of Health appointed women to inspect factories, sweat-shops, and tenement-houses, and five years ago Yonkers first had a women tenement-house inspector, and it is almost two years since I was regularly appointed by the Board of Health, and I can say without vanity that in no city is the work done so effectively as in Yonkers, because the qualifications which a nurse has enables her to do better than the average woman.

* Read at the Congress in Buffalo, September, 1901.

It would take too long to detail the combat gone through to get the appointment.

Landlords, politicians (members), and employes of the Board of Health all fought against the woman inspector, and but for the members of the board and one brave woman, Miss Mary Marshall Butler, president of the Civic League and Woman's Institute, who overcame all opposition, the appointment would not have been successful. After passing the civil-service examination the appointment was made, and in February, 1900, I commenced my duties as an employe of the Board of Health, as formerly I had done the work of the Civic League.

I will pass over the difficult task of working with the same people that fought so hard not to have me, and will only say that those same men are my best friends at present, and agree with the secretary, who said: "How did we ever get along without our woman inspector?"

The Health Officer said that he would like to have one woman inspector to every twenty-five thousand inhabitants. The president of the board said that the moral influence of a woman inspector in the department had been very beneficial. All this I say to show that the work has been appreciated by friend and foe and the need demonstrated.

In our beautiful Terrace City such bad conditions were revealed as to shock the whole community. Tenement-houses in Yonkers compare favorably with those elsewhere; we have all the evils of New York slums, only on a smaller scale. As a large proportion of our population lives in tenement-houses, the need for improvement was great.

The average tenement-house has deprived the people of light, air, and privacy; it has dark bedrooms, with sometimes the worse than useless air-shaft opening into a common hall,—a hall which, on entering, sends a chill through one's bones; as a rule it is not ventilated, is very dark, unventilated toilets open into it, and the damp cellar air and odors from cooking and toilets which greet one on entering are overpowering.

I begin my work in the cellar, much to the surprise of the people, who have neglected to clean it and stored all sorts of rubbish away in it. As a rule, that most important part of the house has also been neglected by the builder, light and air have not been provided for, and after a rain-storm it is very often flooded.

Right here I begin to inspect the plumbing, and unless the house is new the pipes or construction are generally defective. I have to get a light to do this. When I go to the upper floors the living-rooms over the cellar are damp also and very unhealthy. The tenants have malaria, rheumatism, and tuberculosis, children have bronchitis and do not thrive, and even up to the top floor all complain of ill-health.

I go through the rooms, seeing to proper ventilation, cleanliness, need of repair, and over-crowding; follow the plumbing up to the roof; see to the condition of the roof, fire-escape, hall, and toilets, and then inspect the yard, receptacles for garbage, pulley-line poles, cleanliness, and drainage.

I have witnessed scenes which cannot be described, and every day reveals new misery: the poor little children locked up in basements while both parents work in the mill; the household of the habitual drinking-woman, with neglected, vermin-covered children, six in one bed, poorly covered, looking like little skeletons; the consumptive's room, where bedding, floor, and furniture are covered with expectoration, where the children play on the floor, and wife and baby share the same bed; where out of fear a contagious patient is hidden in a closet, and out of kindness a paralytic or any other bedridden patient is left alone for a month or two, never bathed, or body or bed-linen changed for fear of causing pain, and where bed-sores from shoulders to heels have become gangrenous.

It was at a small rear house where I knocked, perceiving the odor far off. "No admittance" was on the face of the woman who was supposed to care for the patient, but I managed to gain entrance, and only by the exercise of the greatest tact was I allowed to see the poor, sick woman and care for her—until death. The horrors of that sick-room I shall never forget, and I hope and pray there may never be another case like it.

The poor, the hungry, and the needy,—but it would take too long to speak of all the different phases.

The teachings of Christ are forgotten. We do not know how our neighbors live, and we would rather not know. Not charity, but justice, is needed.

The greedy landlord who looks for twelve per cent. has to be dealt with. Model tenement-houses can be erected on a paying financial basis. They have proved a success wherever they have been built, and aside from the fact that they returned between five and six per cent., they have provided healthy homes for people of small means.

While they are a great blessing, the greater need is to put existing houses in sanitary condition and prevent badly constructed houses from being erected, and here it is where a woman inspector does the most good.

Everything dangerous to public health is reported,—dark rooms and halls, closed skylights and air-shafts, defective and boxed-in plumbing, filth and disease, damp cellars, overcrowding,—all these things are nuisances and reported, and in a given time remedied, which may be

from a day to a month. If the owner is not willing or able to do it, the Board of Health has the work done. The law is that one toilet shall be provided for every two families, but I think that each family should have its own water-closet, and to have it not in a dark corner, but open to the external air, is just as important.

Fire-escapes should receive better attention; the straight, narrow ladders without the platform will hardly answer for most people—not to speak of the absence of fire-escapes in so many houses.

The house-to-house instruction, aside from reporting nuisances, is an important part of the work.

“Thank God! some one is going around that knows something,” an old Irishwoman said. They have had missionaries to look after their spiritual welfare, but no one to help them bear their burden and improve their lot in life.

After explaining to them how to care for and feed babies, the women will say, “Why did we not know this before?” A birth and a death every year and sickness and undertakers’ bills in many cases cause the poor man’s poverty. Ignorance of the common laws of health and unhealthy homes and food are undoubtedly causes of the prevalence of the drink habit.

Much can be done towards the prevention of the spread of contagious diseases, and especially tuberculosis, not only by the fumigation of rooms and the enforcement of strict cleanliness and isolation, but by providing sputum-cups for the poor which may be burned after use, and after death from this disease fumigation and thorough cleaning before another family moves in.

With the teachings given to the people how to protect themselves and how to improve their ways of living there should go the enforcement of laws governing landlords and agents and an awakening of the social conscience at large, and I confess that is the hardest part of my work. Being a woman and having no vote, politics do not influence my reports. Cellars have to be cleaned and whitewashed, carpets removed from stairs, halls ventilated and cleaned, rooms whitewashed or painted, papers removed where possible, air-shafts and skylights made to open to admit air, roofs repaired, and plumbing looked after. The characteristics of the different nationalities have to be dealt with, and each watched accordingly.

When commencing to inspect a street the children carry the news that the Health Board is around, which is the signal for general house-cleaning.

When I try to have people move out of unhealthy houses, I hear

always the same remark, "We can't find good rooms," and the requests for me to find rooms are numerous indeed and difficult to comply with.

After revealing conditions in Yonkers, some good citizens remodelled old houses and put them in sanitary condition, and it has proved a financial success. There is a woman rent-collector who collects weekly, which is safer for the landlord and easier for the tenant, and with it goes a supervision which is of great value to both. With improved homes we have better health and better citizenship, which is all-important to a nation.

While far from being good, conditions are greatly improved in Yonkers. Better school attendance in winter, decreased immorality rate, especially among children, and greater cleanliness are among the visible results from the work done so far.

Prevention is my motto, and when we can prevent disease we have touched the foundations of most evils.

What larger field of usefulness could we wish for than to go from house to house and give the people the benefit of our knowledge of sanitation, hygiene, and domestic science?

A great English statesman has said, "Of what use is sanitary legislation unless it is practically applied?" and only by obtaining the coöperation of every housekeeper with the Board of Health can rules and laws be enforced.

Let there be well-trained women to do this work. As Dr. Benjamin Lee, president of the State Board of Health, said: "Women are born sanitarians, and make better teachers; besides, they attend to detail work, and I would say the work is essentially among women. No matter what the condition of the house, a woman is admitted because she will understand, when a man cannot enter, and very often the remark is made, 'I am so glad it is a woman this time.'"

After inspecting rooms, closets, and bedding, I am made acquainted with the sorrows, the wants, and sometimes the joys of the family, and I seldom leave without having given advice or help, or put them in the way to help themselves. The invitation to call again soon or spend Sunday with the family shows that the visit has been appreciated.

The field for usefulness is large, and the work fills one's life to the utmost. While it is hard to bear so many people's burdens, the thought that this work is a step in the right direction gives new courage and hope.

I hope to live long enough to see more cities take up this work. Only those women who love the people and will work for public service and not personal gain should take it up. It is the hardest work I have

ever done, and it requires courage and a good deal of faith to enter into all places.

May more nurses prepare for this work, and indeed be the friends of the people.

It is the true mission of the Board of Health to take up this work, and may there be enough public-spirited men and women in every city to see to it that the large class of working-people at least have healthy homes.

At the close of Mrs. Von Wagner's paper the following letter, which was addressed to Miss Dock, was read by the secretary :

"In view of Mrs. von Wagner's attendance at the International Council of Nurses I would like to give my testimony to the efficiency of her work in Yonkers, and emphasize the desirability of inducing nurses to consider the official inspection of tenement-houses as a field for their professional ability.

"In visiting Health Departments here and abroad with reference to the work of women Sanitary Inspectors, it has impressed me that, *other qualifications being equal*, the knowledge possessed by a trained nurse who had the ability to impart it would be of great additional benefit in accomplishing permanent good results, and I am hoping that as the work is taken up in this country more nurses may be found who will fit themselves for the position.

"In Chicago, where six women Tenement and Factory Inspectors are employed by the Health Department, the duties of the women are about the same as those prescribed for men. I believe the duties of the woman inspector should include the *instructive work*, and that to her should be given certain duties differentiating her work from that of a general Sanitary Inspector.

"There are comparatively few places in this country where women are employed in connection with Health Boards, but it is our earnest hope that an impetus may be given to the idea through this Nurses' Council, and that a great and practical purpose may be reached through the paper to be read and discussed at your meeting.

"Wishing you all progress in the various departments of helpfulness you are considering,

"I am very cordially yours,

"MARY MARSHALL BUTLER."

